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A Shadow War Against Terror

The following article is based on reporting by Richard Halloran and David K. Shipler and was written by Mr. Shipler.

WASHINGTON, Nov. 25 — Americans have been attacked in 72 countries since 1968, and American citizens and property are now the targets of about 30 to 35 percent of all international terrorist incidents, according to State Department figures. Attacks so far in 1985 have left 17 Americans dead and 154 wounded.

Nevertheless, the State Department also counts more than 90 planned attacks on American citizens and sites abroad that have been foiled in the last 12 months.

For the United States, these are the silent victories in a shadowy war. The international range of the battle was illustrated by one of those thwarted plots.

About a year ago a Libyan intelligence officer and a Palestinian from Jordan met in Rome to discuss an ambitious, dramatic plot. With nearly 200 pounds of explosives, a truck bomb would be assembled, parked near the United States Embassy in Cairo, and set off by remote control on a busy weekday.

At the Rome meeting, according to American and Egyptian intelligence, the Libyan promised \$500,000 to the Palestinian for his part in the plot.

Over the next six months the Palestinian conducted surveillance on the embassy in Cairo, went to Syria for weapons and explosives training from the radical Abu Nidal Palestinian group, traveled to Lebanon to pick up the explosives-laden truck, took it by ship to Egypt and turned it over to other Palestinians for the attack.

But in that period one of the plotters also served as an informant for Egyptian security, which sealed off the embassy's surrounding streets and foiled the attempted bombing on the afternoon of May 22, 1985.

This invisible record of success stands against a dramatic run of highly publicized violence, including the bombings of American Embassy buildings in Beirut, the destruction of the United States Marine compound at the Beirut airport, the hijacking of a Trans World Airlines jetliner in June, the seizure of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro last month and the hijacking last weekend of an Egyptair jetliner.

Slowly, almost ponderously, the policy makers, intelligence agencies and security systems of the United States have begun to adjust to terrorism as an expanding method of warfare. Washington has created coordinating committees, rescue teams, barriers at embassies and diplomatic efforts to enlist other countries in the battle. A task force on terrorism, headed by Vice President Bush, is scheduled to give President Reagan policy recommendations in late December.

But nobody involved sees a solution to the problem, and some specialists are worried that overreaction may drain resources away from more important areas of concern. Experts believe that intelligence information, passive security and military force are never going to be adequate to the task. Nor can rescue operations be counted on to succeed, as was demonstrated Sunday by the Egyptian commando unit that stormed the Egyptair plane in Malta, setting off a battle and fire that killed 57 hostages.

"We have rhetoric on terrorism, we have policy statements, we don't have strategy," said Brian Jenkins, an expert at the Rand Corporation. "We have a lot of terrorism in the world; we can't eradicate it any more than we can homicide in the United States."

A Trail of Terror

As long as people have used organized violence against each other's tribes and nations, they have invented methods of magnifying small attacks into major political assaults. The relatively weak have often found the vulnerable points of the powerful.

Indeed, the word "assassin" is believed by scholars to derive from "hashish," used by a Shiite Moslem sect, the Hashashin, to drug those about to be sent out on suicide missions against Crusaders and Sunni Moslems in the 11th century.

But the strategy of terrorism has found an especially supportive environment in an age of modern technology and expensive weapons. Unlike common crime, it involves not only victim and assailant, but a third party — an audience — whose policies and politics are the real targets of the assault. Complex factors now encourage it as a means of combat.

"Terrorism is likely to be a prominent factor on the international political landscape for the rest of this century," said Robert B. Oakley of the State Department, who heads the Reagan Administration's Interdepartmental Group on Terrorism. "A worldwide system of competitive arms sales makes weapons available more easily to terrorist groups. Mass communications assure instantaneous publicity for terrorist acts. Travel is becoming easier between different countries. Border controls are diminishing, particularly in Europe."

Many governments find regular warfare too costly, he added, "and terrorism is, therefore, viewed by several countries as a cheap way to strike a blow at their enemies."

While past efforts by the United States against terrorism have been spasmodic, Mr. Jenkins noted, the Reagan Administration appears to be maintaining steadier interest, partly because of terrorism's recent impact on American policy.

The truck bombing of the Marine garrison, in Beirut in 1983, which killed

241 Americans, for example, was instrumental in driving the United States military out of Lebanon. It was carried out by a Shiite Moslem group, reportedly with direction or support from the Governments of Syria and Iran.

The high priority given to combating terrorism also derives from Mr. Reagan's having come into office in 1981 on a groundswell of outrage over the 444-day captivity of American diplomats in Iran, an event that helped weaken President Carter and contributed to Mr. Reagan's election on a promise of tough retaliation.

"Let terrorists beware," the new President said seven days after his first inauguration, "that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution."

But when it has come down to specific cases, the Reagan Administration has been divided on the practicality and wisdom of retribution, often because a clear military target has not been found. Mr. Reagan said at a news conference during the T.W.A. hijacking last June, "If you just aim in the general direction and kill some people, well, then, you're a terrorist, too."

The most precise use of military force against terrorists came in the Achille Lauro episode last month, when Navy F-14 fighters forced down an Egyptian airliner carrying Palestinians who had hijacked the Italian passenger ship. It was that same plane that was hijacked last weekend.

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The question of whether and when to use force has been a matter of debate within the Government, and the absence of clear policy, military officers say, has made the armed forces uncertain about what contingencies they should prepare for. They say regular forces are not trained to handle many counterterror operations.

Assassination is ruled out under a 1981 Presidential executive order on intelligence, which states, "No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination."

Concerning use of the military, Mr. Jenkins of Rand said, "It's not in our interest to enter the battlefield of our opponent, where he has all the advantages."

He added: "When we use force there ought to be a clear, unambiguous message of who did it and why we did it. It should have the clear support of Congress and the American people. Military force is not something you should throw around casually. It is a blunt instrument."

The Military View

Military officers complain that intelligence on terrorists and their whereabouts is insufficient to pinpoint targets. The United States has photographic and electronic satellites that collect much information on the Soviet Union but few spies able to infiltrate a small group of highly motivated terrorists in the Middle East.

In addition, American counterterrorist forces are based in the United States, far from the Middle East, where many terrorist attacks against Americans have occurred. Getting a force there in time has always been a problem, the officers say.

They explain that American military forces could be assigned at least two missions in countering terrorists. In one, highly trained troops could be used to rescue Americans who had been taken hostage. In the other, those or regular forces could be used in retaliation for a terrorist attack.

In the last few years the Pentagon has created several teams and commands for these purposes.

The Joint Special Operations Agency, headed by a two-star general, is charged with preparing doctrine and plans to guide counterterrorist forces in their formation, training and operations. But it has no command authority over the forces.

The Joint Special Operations Command, a secret unit station at Fort Bragg, N.C., is reported to have control over units that might be used to repel terrorists or to rescue Americans taken hostage. They include the Army's Delta Force of soldiers at Fort Bragg and Task Force 160 of high speed helicopters at Fort Campbell, Ky.

The Navy's Seal Team Six of frogmen, at Little Creek, near Norfolk, Va., is the Navy's counterterror force. The Air Force's Special Operations Wing at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida would fly specially equipped C-130 transports in a counterterrorist operation.

The Delta Force

The Delta Force has reportedly been deployed several times: to advise Venezuelan forces on how to retake a hijacked plane; to Oman to prepare to retake a hijacked plane in Kuwait, and to the Mediterranean at the time of the T.W.A. hijacking. So far as is known, however, those forces were not used in any of those incidents.

The known responses have been more measured. The Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department's security force, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Pentagon and other parts of the Government have beefed up antiterrorist operations, devoting new money and personnel to the task.

But some officials and private experts are concerned that terrorism's spectacular nature may draw resources away from more critical areas of nuclear and conventional defense.

"We need the capabilities because it's another form of warfare," a military intelligence officer said. "But terrorism is not a major policy problem. It's a policy nuisance."

Walter Laqueur of the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University agrees with this assessment. "There is a tendency to overrate the importance of terrorism," he said. "I don't mean there is no problem — that would be foolish. But the terrorist act by itself is nothing — only publicity."

And the public attention, he said, creates a serious situation during a hostage-taking. "The President takes over, the Secretary of State and the Government practically come to a standstill," Mr. Laqueur said. "This is a problem."

American and some foreign officials believe that progress has been made internationally in stripping terrorism of its mantle of political immunity, in branding terrorism a common crime subject to normal police work and judicial procedure.

In October 1984, Interpol, the international police organization, began channeling requests among its member countries for information about terrorists and their organizations, thereby ending a policy of treating terrorism as a political act.

Extraditing Terrorists

The United States has stepped up efforts to have terrorists extradited from other countries. But Stephen S. Trott, Assistant Attorney General for the Criminal Division of the Justice Department, said the policy was being undermined by resistance in the Senate to a revised American-British extradition treaty.

In four cases, Federal judges have refused British requests for extradition of members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army on charges of killing soldiers, ruling that the crimes were political. The treaty revision, signed last June, would exempt certain violent crimes from the political protection, including murder, manslaughter, bombing and kidnapping.

"We're talking out of both sides of our mouth," Mr. Trott said. "On one side, we are standing up and demanding that terrorists be returned to the U.S. On the other side, we're unable to limit the political offense doctrine. We wouldn't sit still for five minutes if somebody had shot President Reagan and beat it over to England and said, 'Political offense.'"

Robert Friedlander, assistant counsel of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Constitution, said the hesitation of many senators was based partly on "political pressure from Irish groups in this country," and partly on the sense that since the accused had killed soldiers, not civilians, they were involved in the kind of politically motivated armed insurrection that such treaties have sought to protect.

Not only police departments but also intelligence agencies are sharing information across political boundaries with increasing ease, according to officials involved.

Attempts have even been made to open such channels between Moscow and Washington. The United States offered information to the Soviet Union after four members of the Soviet Embassy in Beirut were kidnapped recently, Mr. Oakley of the State Department said.

"We believe that the threat is to all countries and calls for cooperation among them," he declared. "In that spirit, we did offer to talk about what we knew. But we assume they had better information than we did. They have more friends in West Beirut."

One of the Russians was killed, and three were released after the Soviet Union, with Syrian help, reportedly pinpointed their location.

Although the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries have provided military training and weapons to Palestinian guerrillas who have then conducted terrorist attacks, the Russians themselves have also been victims of terrorism, and some American officials with long experience in the field see room for increased Soviet-American cooperation.

"I think it would be a very healthy thing if we could get into the information exchange with them," said Donald Gregg, Vice President Bush's assistant for national security and a veteran of more than 30 years with the C.I.A.

Even in the Middle East, where hatreds are powerful, intelligence-sharing has sometimes crossed political lines. On many occasions, Israel has reportedly passed warnings through the United States to King Hussein of Jordan about plots to assassinate him — a service based on Israel's calculation that a relatively moderate Hussein

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having radicals in power there.

Information on terrorists is made available to Israel by the United States, Britain and other Western countries that refuse to provide the Israelis with conventional military intelligence on the disposition of Arab armed forces.

"The United States doesn't give us information on Jordan or Egypt," said a senior Israeli officer with a background in military intelligence, but Washington does share extensively on terrorism. "In the terrorism business," he said, "there are no political limitations."

American officials are ambivalent about the value of Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, as a source. "I think they have very good information," a former C.I.A. official said, "but Mossad can sometimes be a polemical intelligence agency. They produce the information that justifies the policy they want to follow."

Sharing Vital Data

At times, the political advantages of collaboration can outweigh the damage to intelligence sources.

When the four Palestinian hijackers of the Achille Lauro were about to be flown out of Egypt on an Egyptian jetliner, for example, Israel conveyed crucial data to the United States, based on monitored radio communications, including the plane's time of takeoff

its tail, an Israeli military official said. This supplemented American information and helped American jet fighter pilots fly close to one aircraft after another over the Mediterranean, picking out the right one to force down in Sicily.

The Israelis publicized some of their intelligence-sharing to take advantage of the positive image they thought it would give them in the United States, the official explained, knowing that a price would be paid by alerting the Egyptians to the fact that their radio frequencies were being monitored. Since the incident, he noted, the Egyptians have been more careful in their transmissions.

At least one senior American official was angered by disclosures by the United States, arguing that they jeopardized the methods, sources and locations used by intelligence agencies.

Similarly, officials have been distressed by newspaper reports on a C.I.A. strategy to undermine Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader, who is seen at the root of much international terrorism.

One official involved in counter-terrorism criticized the C.I.A. plan, saying "results aren't always what we expect" in such plans, especially when the United States role becomes known.

Some intelligence officials say the strongest opposition to the Qaddafi Government comes from more radical figures who have advocated stepped-up attacks on American interests.

Although Libya has occasionally laid plans to kill American diplomats, intelligence officials say — most notably in Western Europe after the United States downed two Libyan planes in the Gulf of Sidra in 1981 — the plots were abandoned when Colonel Qaddafi was told that the United States knew his intentions. No direct attacks have occurred, the officials note.

Terrorism by Libya

Most Libyan terrorist activities have been assassinations of Libyan dissidents abroad. Since 1980 there have been more than 30 such attempts, and last summer a Libyan diplomat at the United Nations was expelled from the United States for purported involvement in one plot.

According to a State Department official, the Egyptians have surmised that one such attempt may have been an explanation for the hijacking last weekend.

A year ago Egypt fooled Colonel Qaddafi into believing that Libyan agents had assassinated former Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Bakkush of Libya, who lives in Egypt. Actually, the agents had been arrested, but Libya took responsibility for the killing.

This month, the official said, the Egyptians arrested four more Libyan agents while they were trying to kill Mr. Bakkush. The hijacking followed.

Rescue Raids: A Record of Risk

July 3, 1976

ISRAELI RAID AT ENTEBBE AIRPORT

Israeli commandos stage a night-time raid on airport and break into passenger terminal where hijackers and hostages are spending the night. Commandos rescue 103 passengers and crew members. The dead include 7 of 10 pro-Palestinian hijackers, 20 Ugandan troops, 3 Israeli hostages and the head of one of Israeli rescue units.

June 13, 1977

RESCUE OF SCHOOLTEACHERS FROM SOUTH MOLUCCANS

Dutch marines in armored carrier attack village school in Bovensmilde, the Netherlands, where four schoolteachers had been held for 20 days by 4 South Moluccan gunmen. Kidnappers are quickly overpowered and there are no casualties.

Oct. 18, 1977

HIJACKING OF LUFTHANSA PLANE

West German commandos force their way onto hijacked airliner in Mogadishu, Somalia, ending a 5-day, 6,000-mile hijacking episode. Commandos rescue 86 passengers and crew members. Three of four hijackers are killed and fourth is wounded, as is one passenger. Pilot had been killed by hijackers two days before rescue.

Feb. 19, 1978

KILLING OF EGYPTIAN COMMANDOS IN CYPRUS

At Larnaca airport, Egyptian commandos try to rescue a Cypriot plane held by two hijackers who killed a prominent Egyptian editor the day before. Troops of the Cypriot National Guard intercept commandos and kill 15; 22 people, including 7 guardsmen and 2 reporters, are wounded. After one-hour battle, hijackers, who say they are Palestinians, free 11 Arab hostages and four crewmen and surrender.

April 24, 1980

UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT TO FREE HOSTAGES IN IRAN

In maneuver code-named "Operation Blue Light," 6 U.S. C-130 Hercules transport planes and 8 RH-53

helicopters carrying 90 commandos enter Iranian airspace on April 24. President Carter cancels mission after problems with 3 helicopters. During pullout from Iran, one helicopter collides with a C-130, killing 8 men and injuring 5.

May 5, 1980

STORMING OF IRANIAN EMBASSY IN LONDON

The Special Air Service regiment storms embassy and frees 19 Iranian and British hostages held captive since April 30 by Iranian-Arab gunmen. Assault is ordered after one hostage is killed and gunmen threaten to kill one hostage every 30 minutes. Six gunmen were killed and one was captured.

Jan. 28, 1982

RESCUE OF BRIG. GEN. JAMES L. DOZIER

After 42 days in the hands of Red Brigades, special Italian antiterrorist forces rescue him from Padua apartment. Three men and two women are seized in the 90-second raid, during which no shots are fired.

Nov. 7, 1985

RAID AGAINST COLOMBIAN REBELS

Government troops and police storm Palace of Justice in Bogota, Colombia, where an estimated 60 M-19 rebels held dozens of judges and Government workers hostage. The President of the Supreme Court and eight other judges are killed and the death toll is reported to be more than 100. Some reports say all rebels died but others indicate a few escaped.

Nov. 24, 1985

EGYPTIAN AIRLINER IN MALTA

Plane enroute to Cairo from Athens, hijacked day before and diverted to Malta, is stormed by Egyptian troops after hijackers begin to kill some of the hostages on board. As troops rush onto plane, hijackers toss grenades at passengers. Death toll is put at 60, 57 of whom are said to have died in rescue attempt, including an American. One hijacker survives attack and is hospitalized.